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P-Solen, Frank

Dunn, Warren

Chile

CIA or Drugs, Latin Leftists Blame Peace Corps

By FRANK SOLER
Herald Latin America Staff

America's young "ambassadors of peace" are increasingly running into hostility abroad.

This is especially true of the Peace Corps in Latin America, where a rising leftist-nationalist wave is sweeping the continent.

Hailed by many Latin Americans as the most imaginative of President Kennedy's New Frontier programs when it was created a decade ago, the Peace Corps now is being damned by leftist-nationalists in that region as:

- Q A cover for CIA espionage activities.

- Q A supporter of oppressive governments and an outlet for "imperialistic" propaganda.

- Q An organization bent on propagating the use of harmful drugs among Latin America's young.

- Q A "fascist" enterprise whose aim is to destroy Latin America's vast Indian population through the use of family planning, contraceptives and even sterilization of Indian women.

Although none of the charges have been substantiated, they recently prompted the ouster of about 120 members of the Peace Corps mission from Bolivia.

Paradoxically, shepherds in Bolivia were using rusty tin cans to shear sheep until the Peace Corps introduced shears in 1962 and increased wool production by thousands of pounds a year.

Another country, Panama, requested the withdrawal of the more than 80 Peace Corps contingent from its territory in February, ostensibly because the Panamanian government would institute a Peace Corps of its own. The last of the volunteers returned to the United States in April.

"We can enlist Panamanian volunteers to do the same thing the Peace Corps is doing," Panamanian Foreign Minister Juan Antonio Tack told the United States. He said the decision "does not necessarily mean relations between our two countries are cooler."

However, the request came after repeated skirmishes between Panamanian strongman Gen. Omar Torrijos and the United States over the granting of political asylum in the American-controlled Canal Zone to persons wanted by the Torrijos regime.

But it was in Bolivia, where the bizarre is often commonplace, that the Peace Corps came under the heaviest fire.

Hardly a week has gone by without a verbal attack against the the Peace Corps since army Gen. Juan Jose Torres seized the presidency in a flurry of coups and counter-coups last October and declared his leftist-nationalist intentions.

One week the leftist press would accuse Peace Corpsmen of being CIA agents in mufti.

The next they would berate the Peace Corps for "imperialism" and its aid to governments whose political philosophies counter to their own.

When narcotics arrests were made by police, the leftist press would blame the Peace Corps for introducing the drugs into Bolivia.

Finally, leftists claimed the Peace Corps was sterilizing Indian women to exterminate the race.

One Peace Corps volunteer was accused of running a brothel.

The charges were ridiculous and few believed them. But the Peace Corps was still given notice in mid-May to leave within 30 days.

When word of the expulsion from Bolivia reached Washington, Peace Corps officials issued a cautious statement which said, in part:

"We are aware of no specific reasons given by the Bolivian government for this action. It is noted, however, that recently many articles have appeared in the Bolivian press accusing the Peace Corps of everything from being 'imperialistic spies' to sterilizing Bolivian Indian women."

"The charges in Bolivia are one of those things that don't really need an answer," says Warren Dunn, director of Public Relations for the Peace Corps.

"The accusation of being a CIA front is an old song. We have faced that everywhere we go. It is politically inspired. It is not true now, it never has been and never will be.

"As far as the sterilization charges go, we were involved in some family planning and physical hygiene programs, but we had nothing to do with any sterilization.

"The charge was trumped up by people who . . . let's say they didn't have the best interests of the Peace Corps at heart."

Dunn is noncommittal about other possible trouble spots for the Peace Corps in that region — namely Chile, now run by a Marxist government, and Peru, where a leftist-nationalist military junta is in power.

(In the fall of 1969 before Marxist Salvador Allende was elected president, the Chilean legislature unanimously voted to investigate leftist charges that the Peace Corps was riddled with CIA spies. The charges triggered a controversy, but no evidence of CIA involvement

"There are no major problems in those countries," Dunn says. "The problems are minor, of the kind you have whenever you are running an operation like ours."

The "operation," as Dunn calls it, is a far cry from 1961, when 12 volunteers were sent to Colombia to trailblaze Peace Corps activities in Latin America.

Excluding Bolivia and Panama, the Peace Corps now is represented in 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries.

With more than 1,000 men and nearly 1,000 women, The Peace Corps' Latin American program covers the largest area in the world. Africa is second.

There now are 347 Peace Corpsmen in Brazil; 37 in British Honduras; 83 in Chile; 191 in Colombia; 90 in Costa Rica (with the possibility that those expelled from Bolivia may be transferred there); 65 in the Dominican Republic; 170 in the eastern Caribbean; 22 in Ecuador; 70 in El Salvador; 75 in Guatemala; 20 in Guyana; 150 in Honduras; 180 in Jamaica; 65 in Nicaragua; 68 in Paraguay; 219 in Peru; nine in Uruguay and 200 in Venezuela.